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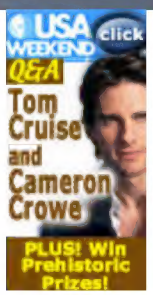

Sunday, December 9, 2001

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Why the train will fail

By ROBERT M. COOK

Staff Writer

Do I take the train or my car?

When I go to Boston for a Red Sox game at Fenway Park or a Celtics or Bruins game at the Fleet Center, I never know what to do. I probably have a better chance of trying to figure out how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop.

If I ride the train from Newburyport, Mass., to Boston round trip it costs about $10 compared to the $25 I would have to pay if I park the car near Harvard Yard, never mind the gas it takes to get there and back. But train schedules and recreational outings don't always dovetail, because the last train heads back to Newburyport at 10:40 p.m.

For example, in May 2000, my wife, Mary, and I decided to give the train a try when we went to see the Red Sox play the Detroit Tigers in a night game. I assumed the Red Sox would dispatch the Tigers early, which would allow us to leave the game in the eighth inning and make our way home. Oh, how wrong I was.

Little did I know the Red Sox and Tigers would engage in an epic, extra-inning struggle. As the teams jousted into the ninth inning, the score was deadlocked, but it was 10 p.m. and we had to leave.

Mary and I made the train at North Station with less than five minutes to spare for the long, lumbering ride home. Then the train stopped in Beverly around 11:15, forcing us to get off and wait 20 minutes for the next train to take us home.

As we waited in the cold night air, a complete stranger told us how he was in the CIA and worked for the Internal Revenue Service. Unfortunately, trains seem to attract these kind of people. Even after we boarded the next train, he wouldn't shut up. A conductor felt so sorry for us that he performed a magic trick. We wished he could have made that idiot vanish like the coin in the wooden box.

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I don't believe I will ever be faced with such difficult decisions when it comes to Amtrak's new Downeaster that will begin service from Boston to Portland, Maine, on Dec. 15.

There's no way I'm going to fit my activities within the confines of the train's limited schedule or shell out the dough for their overpriced fares.

Contrary to what Amtrak officials believe, this new train has failure written all over it. No one with even a hint of common sense will abandon the control and comfort of their automobiles to ride the rails. For one thing, if I lived in Massachusetts and I wanted to visit Portsmouth, I would never dream of taking Amtrak to Dover unless I also enjoyed using a cab or bus to get there.

No one will buy into Amtrak's marketing pitch describing Dover as the "Gateway to the White Mountains." It usually takes me about an hour and a half of hard driving even to get close to Mount Washington.

I won't bother using this new train to spend a day in Boston either, because the schedule won't allow me to have a good time. The 9:42 a.m. train from Dover to North Station arrives at 11:30 a.m., according to the Downeaster's schedule posted on its Web site (www.downeaster.com).

But should I decide I would like to stay in the city after the 6:15 p.m. train, say to go out for a nice dinner, I would be forced to stick around until the last train leaves at 11 p.m. I don't relish arriving back in Dover at 12:38 a.m. When I drive to Boston, my day and night are my own and I decide when I want to head home.

When I first heard about the new train, I thought it would be great to travel from Dover to New York City or Washington, D.C. But then I realized I would have to unload my luggage at North Station and take two subways to get to South Station to catch a connector. So much for that idea.

I'll probably just drive to South Station instead and park there.

The only thing worse than using this train for a day trip would be commuting from Dover to Boston to work five days a week. For example, the 7:02 a.m. train from Dover wouldn't get me to a Financial District office by 8:30 a.m.

It rolls into Boston at around 8:50 a.m. It takes another 15 minutes or so to take the Green line and the Red line across town, which means I would get there sometime after 9 in the morning. On the other hand, if I had to stay late to make up the time, the schedule works. I could easily take the 6:15 train home and get back to Dover around 8 p.m. and catch my favorite television shows before going to bed, getting up and having to do it all over again.

I wouldn't mind parting with $27 per round-trip every day if I didn't have to drive my car through the Big Dig. I could always cut costs by going with a $240 monthly pass instead. That's quite a bargain until I consider how I could no longer go to the gym on

weeknights or spend time with my wife at the end of the day.

No matter how hard I try, the train and I just can't make it work.

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